DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 754 CS 213 036

AUTHOR Sullivan, William
TITLE The "Norton Anthology" and the Canon of English Literature.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (San Antonio, TX, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; English Instruction; *English Literature; Higher Education; Literature Appreciation
IDENTIFIERS *Literary Canon; *Norton Anthology of Literature

ABSTRACT

An examination of the additions, deletions, and revisions of the 2-volume "Norton Anthology of English Literature" (the most popular text used by college teachers) from the 1962 first edition to the 1986 fifth edition, sought to identify those changes which would confirm the editors' stated purposes in the prefaces and to speculate on some unstated assumptions or purposes. A review of each succeeding edition showed: (1) that 3 centuries of scientism are well represented in the 5 editions; (2) an expansion from about 3,450 pages in the first edition to over 5,000 pages in the fifth, while the percentage of pages devoted to women and contemporary voices is less in the last edition of 1986 than in the first edition of 1962; (3) there are no more than a handful of significant deletions from the "Norton" in its 24 years. This indicates that texts have remained the same for a quarter of a century, and suggests that English and American literary culture has abandoned the search for the questions and issues of these times and settled for trying to find answers to the questions of the nineteenth century and before. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

The Norton Anthology and the Canon of English Literature

William Sullivan

ED336754

CS213036

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Wm Sullivan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Norton Anthology and the Canon of English Literature

My plan was to look at the additions, deletions, and revisions of the two-volume *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, from the 1962 first edition to the 1986 fifth edition, and to identify those changes which would confirm the editors' stated purposes in the prefaces and to speculate on some unstated assumptions or purposes. Of course, the motivating question was what, if anything, has the Norton Anthology had to do with the canon. Needless to say, the authority and influence of these texts are great because they are so often the texts from which beginning instructors and assistant professors create their courses.

And the influence can begin with graduate students. When I was a graduate student at LSU in the late sixties, it was common knowledge that you could pass the English Literature comprehensive exams if you knew the Norton Anthology cover to cover. Consequently, a plum assignment was the two-semester sophomore survey of British Literature course. You could teach the Norton cover to cover as a way of reviewing and preparing for comprehensives.

Were canons created by the Norton Anthology? I don't think so, but the Norton certainly had a great influence. In Wendell V. Harris' fine essay, "Canonicity," in the January 1991 issue of PMLA, he says, "If The Canon no longer lives, the reason is that it never did; there have been and are only selections with purposes." This is partially true, but mostly not. It was true for those LSU graduates who were preparing to take comprehensive exams, theirs was a canon, capital CANON. But there are also The Canons for individuals, communities, ages, nations, The Canons less for purposes than for discovering purposes, for discovering the questions or issues that matter to meaningful living.

Different groups have different canons at different times, and often they are very clearly defined. My father and his brother and ten sisters had a very clear if very narrow canon. Although having no particular interest at the time, I still knew what the texts were:

CS213036

the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, Swift, Pope, Dickens, Austin, Mark Twain, and others. These works or authors were cited daily because they offered paradigms for the questions and issues important for living and for understanding life. I did not keep up with my aunts, but I did keep up with my father, and I watched as his canon was expanded and revised.

As my father read new texts and defined new issues, his canon changed. Harris begins his essay with the stated assumption that "canons are made up of readings, not of disembodied texts." Again, this also is partially true, but mostly not. Texts in a canon are far more likely to endure than are readings. Readings change as one accumulates experiences, not the least important of which are reading experiences. The power of texts over readings to endure is so well illustrated by Milton's Paradise Lost. In the fifth edition of the Norton, the editors have added 900 lines to Books IV, V, and VIII "to satisfy requests for more of the psychological as opposed to the combative Milton."

I don't know exactly what that means, but I do know my students are much more interested in issues related to male-female relationships and comparisons than in the limits of freewill and man's place in the Great Chain of Being, the kind of trash my generation thought it important to look for in Paradise Lost. My guess is that years hence, in spite of today's readings, the same text will be used to help another age to clarify its questions and issues, but not to offer answers or solutions.

As a beginning graduate student, I had a course in Victorian literature under Mr. Watkins, reputed to be the brightest professor in the department. When a student asked, "What is Tennyson saying is the answer to the 'woman question,'" Mr. Watkins replied, "I am not sure I know, but I do know that we read Tennyson not to find answers. Rather, we read him and all of Victorian literature to find out exactly what are the questions, the issues."

Walker Percy said over and over again that the way the twentieth century had most distinguished itself was by not even trying to find out what were the questions. His Binx Bolling in The Movie-Goer sees the CHRIST IS THE ANSWER bumper sticker and thinks, "Yes, but what is the question." Instead of trying to determine what are the questions of its

own time, the twentieth century has mostly been content to answer the questions of the mid-nineteenth century and before, those questions raised by readings of Marx, Darwin, and Freud. Percy himself tried to write fiction which would project at least one important question of the late twentieth century: "How have over three centuries of scientism changed how and what man thinks of himself."

Those three centuries of scientism are well represented in the five editions of the Norton Anthology - from More and Bacon to Locke and Hobbes to pages and pages of nineteenth century response. But those texts were there from the first edition of 1962. A review of each succeeding edition shows an expansion from about 3450 pages in the first edition to over 5000 pages in the fifth edition. Over the years, more and more women writers appear and Christina Rossetti has more poems in each succeeding edition. By the fifth edition, Mary Woolstancraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Virginia Woolf are represented, and a number of other women writers make at least brief appearances - Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, Queen Elizabeth, Mary Wortley Montague, Edith Sitwell, Katherine Mansfield, and Edna O'Brien. There are also brief appearances of twentieth-century male poets - Siegfried Sasson, Ivor Gurney, and Isaac Rosenberg in the 4th edition, Henry Reed, Keith Douglas, Charles Causley, and Derek Wolcott in the 5th edition.

Most of the added material, however, went to Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare, Milton, and you can guess the others. Of the 1550 or so added pages, about 200, less than 15%, were allotted to women and contemporary voices. It appears that the per cent of pages devoted to women and contemporary voices is less in the last edition of 1986 than in the first edition of 1962.

There are no more than a handful of significant deletions from the Norton in its twenty-four years. Among them are the complete text of Comus (appeared in the 1974 third edition and was deleted in the 1979 fourth edition); Sheridan's School for Scandal (deleted in the 1968 second edition); The Brome Play of Abraham and Isaac, (added in the 1974 third edition and deleted in the 1979 fourth edition); and several modern poets added in the

third edition and deleted or replaced in fourth edition. Revisions typically have been exchanges of one work or one author for another: Shaw's play was Arms and the Man, then Major Barbara, and later Mrs. Warren's Profession. Congreve has been represented by The Way of the World, then Love for Love, and then The Way of the World again. Also some of the section topics have been revised or changed in each edition.

The Preface to the fifth edition of the Norton Anthology reads, "The aim of this anthology, as in the original edition, is to make available, for the indispensable courses that introduce students to the excellence and variety of English literature, the major works in prose and verse from Beowulf to the present, in accurate and readable texts, edited so as to make them readily accessible to students. A vital literary culture, however, never stands still. The policy, therefore, has been to provide periodic revisions designed to take advantage of newly recovered or better edited tests, to stay in touch with scholarly discoveries, new developments in criticism, and the altering interests of readers, and to keep the anthology within the mainstream of contemporary cultural and intellectual concerns."

In light of the changes noted here, it is to be wondered if perhaps a "vital literary culture" may stand still after all. It is to be wondered if the English like their American cousins have abandoned the search for the questions and issues of their own time and settled for trying to find answers to others' questions, which can be found as Mr. Watkins also noted "on bumper stickers or lavatory walls, in newspaper ads or in political slogans, almost anywhere but in literature." Last spring on a departmental final, a Winthrop student lamented that the contemporary student of history is at such a disadvantage compared to his forebears, after all he has so much more history to master. I suppose that if he compares editions of the Norton Anthology, he may change his major to English, where texts, at least, have remained about the same for over a quarter of a century.